

**Jazz History MUSC 560 Research Paper
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Jelly Roll Morton: His Life and Significance

Morton's Musical Influences

Egotistical, intense, and driven, the Creole, New Orleans born Jelly Roll Morton reigned as one of the first jazz pianists and composers. He claimed to be the inventor of jazz, as well as the greatest jazz piano player. Additionally, he dubbed himself the Father of Jazz, but a few years down the road, Louis Armstrong strode into the scene and stole that title away. During his 51 years (1890-1941), Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe graduated from self-study on the instruments in his home, which included the trombone, zither, guitar, piano, harmonica, and Jews-harp, to taking lessons on the 6-string steel guitar at the age of five, paid for by his godmother, Eulalie. Speaking only French in his younger years, he enjoyed many trips to the French Opera House with his family, where his ears took in a myriad of European sounds, which included not only French works like Gounod's *Faust*, but also works from Verdi, Debussy, Mozart, and Donizetti. The sounds of the soprano embellishments, akin to improvisation, with the harmonic, melodic and phrase structures of the European music, came to be mixed in with the many sounds of New Orleans street music in his mind. During these early years, Morton often found himself singing spirituals with a street quartet, enjoying the liberties that each singer took to create new and beautiful harmonies to the familiar melodies. At this

time, Morton avoided playing the piano. Having seen men with flowing wigs playing the piano in the European operas, Morton was not totally convinced that the job of the pianist was exactly appropriate for the masculine sort. However, his good friend, Bud Scott, helped him see things a bit differently, and when Morton finally witnessed a man with short hair tearing up the keyboard with a ragtime tune, he decided to turn his talents toward the keyboard so that he could create those sounds.

Morton began taking piano lessons, but his first piano teacher was a fake, he found out, when he learned to read music and discovered that she was not actually ever playing the scores in front of her. Moving on, he found a ragtime teacher, but when his step-daddy found out he was playing ragtime, he gave him a good whipping for participating in such a bawdy musical style. To continue his lessons, Morton went to his godmother's house for the lessons. Eulalie had lost her own children, and seemed to greatly favor her godson Morton, often providing him with opportunities for lessons, and for a home away from home when he needed such.

When the doctor diagnosed the ultra-thin Morton with pre-consumption, he was prescribed hard physical labor, so he began working as a dishwasher, and later as a barrel-maker, to sweat off the disease. When his mother and stepfather died, he found himself living with his grandmother and often visiting his godmother, Eulalie. Her interest in voodoo incantations spread somewhat into Morton's broken Catholic theology, and he was glad to spend time with her, shedding the guilt his other family members laid on him over the saloon music that claimed his interest. Eulalie

arranged for Morton to take piano lessons from Professor Nickerson at St. Joseph's School, allowing him one more offering of formal music education before he launched out on his own pursuits.

Morton spent his teenage years hanging out in the District, listening to all of the best piano players in town at the sporting houses and saloons. He moved in with his grandmother and pretended to continue his work in the barrel factory, while he secretly built his profile in the brothels. When the Frenchman's came into need for a pianist, someone recommended Morton. He was under-aged, but they hired him, anyway, putting him in a room facing away from the activities of the brothel. He took the job, segueing instantly from boyhood into a man of the sensuous, carnal music scene of the New Orleans' heartbeat.

At this time, Morton started to feel comfortable with his own performance styles, while listening to everyone else's music around the lively town. He labeled boogie-woogie as boring, with its few chord progressions, and disliked the fact that it left little room for development. He called it "honky-tonk" music.

As music in New Orleans developed, the self-trained musicians, like Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, and Louis Armstrong, who called themselves "fake" players (but could creatively tango with any melody), lived uptown, above Canal Street, playing in such places as The Bi4 and Big Easy, and often out in the open parks. Morton belonged to the second camp of musicians, those who were somewhat classically trained, and could read anything on the page; their community was below Canal Street, and they could be heard in such places as Economy Hall and Independence Hall, with their refined sound of precision, accuracy, and balance. In

a small town like New Orleans, however, the musicians often ended up playing in the same events, such as funeral marches, parades, Storyville, and honky-tonks. Alongside this mix of street musicians strode the church music, which the newly freed blacks knew, because they had flocked to the Baptist churches for aid after the war. The long notes of the brass bands, dubbed as “long,” simply because their sound was so different from the driving 8th and 16th notes of the street music, were loudly played in the streets during the funeral marches. Their sound thus became another integral part of everyone’s ear in the colorful streets.

Morton’s piano skills continued to grow, and he was playing classics, ragtime, and Spanish tunes, making \$80-\$100 per night at the Frenchman’s. He listened to Tony Jackson, Alfred Wilson, and Albert Carroll playing octave tremolos, hand-over-hand figures, and broken chords that helped light up his growing piano vocabulary. However, after he got into a fight with his uncle, his family uncovered his secret lifestyle, and kicked him out of the house. He would never return to his middle class life after this. He wandered the streets all night that night, and then bought a ticket to Biloxi to his godmother Eulalie’s house. In this sister party town, he refined his piano and gambling skills, learned how to cheat, and peddled fake medicines along the coast. He would return to New Orleans whenever he got into trouble, spread some money around his remaining family, and find them only too happy to forgive his bad lifestyle to receive the money in his pockets.

Morton then took to playing roadshows, in which he played piano, and also danced, sang, and told jokes for the audiences. He survived incidents of mob killings

directed at a black troupe who might have paid a little too much attention to one of the white ladies, but he never seemed the least daunted by these incidents.

Building his persona, Morton decided to have a gold crown put on one of his front teeth, with a half-carat diamond set inside it. His new attention to crowd appeal saw him building a wardrobe of silk suits with jewels, creating a large entourage for his travels. He dubbed himself “Jelly Roll” at this time, and although other performers had used that title before him, it seemed to actually stick for him. Morton began traveling through Texas, where his skills went unrivalled, and then he ended up in Tennessee in 1908. There he met W.C. Handy, who claimed that the blues could not be played by a band. Morton knew differently, having heard the many bands of New Orleans. This seemed to make Morton more determined to produce the entire band with his hands at the piano. As he continued winning piano challenges against whomever would make their attempt to trump him, he also began playing his own music, rather than merely improvising the tunes requested at the bar.

In 1902, Morton began writing tunes that recalled his training with piano teacher Frank Richards, and by 1905, the composition, “New Orleans Blues” came out of his fingers, with double octaves and a bit of habanera rhythm that echoed all the way back to his early guitar teacher’s sounds. The left hand included octaves imitating the trombone, and then the right hand took off in unexpected octaves that stepped outside the meter. This composition led to other innovations, such as dual themes played together, rhythms that foreshadowed swing, and harmonies with intended dissonance. “King Porter Stomp” followed, and became his icon in the

1920's, and a national hit in the 1930's. It has also become a jazz landmark that has been repeatedly rescored for various performing groups ever since. The significance of this piece unfolded over time: James P. Johnson later built on Morton's idea of using a light, ethereal introduction in the high register of the keys, followed by the intense bouncing rhythm that went beyond ragtime. In this work, each thematic repetition brought more intense rhythmic tension between the two hands, the right-hand syncopations increased, and the total effects of the piece brought about a swinging sound looking forward ten years ahead of the swing era. Before the piece ended, a surprise adorned the third theme of this piece, when Morton moved abruptly from the key of Ab to Db, cooling the entire landscape of the piece down into its finale. Morton later admitted to Roy Carew that he felt some of his fellow musicians, such as Sammy Davis, were actually more adept at faster playing than he, and that's why he included the slower finale that was later dubbed a genius finale in this piece: merely for his own performance security! Incidentally, the piece came to be a tune that most swing bands would later include in their standard repertoire.

By his twenties, Morton was traveling through Louisiana, Memphis, Missouri, and the Gulf Coast as a prominent jazz pianist. He began writing down his music to settle disputes he'd had with pianists in St. Louis, who would not acknowledge his superiority. The story is told that they placed the works of various classical composers in front of him, and he amazed them by "sight reading" each, but eventually, his competitors discovered that he had actually known the pieces by memory for years. After this experience, publishing music became his next step

toward establishing his superiority and securing his legacy. When Morton actually began writing down his music on manuscript paper, he really did accomplish a new feat for jazz, because the previously published ragtime music did not include stop-time devices, improvisations, jazz-based breaks, or swing rhythms that now needed to be a part of the new jazz scores. The year 1915 found his “Jelly Roll Blues” in print as a bona fide jazz score, while Jelly Roll traveled up the West Coast as a celebrity, spreading his music into new areas of the country.

Determined to also conquer Chicago, Morton traveled to the windy city, where he found himself in another dispute – this time with W.C. Handy – over who invented the Blues. The dispute was quite publicized. Having played together in 1908, the two might have had some mutual corroboration in the first steps of the Blues, but eventually, jazz historians relegated to Jelly Roll the honor of being called the Blues inventor. Later, when Paul Whiteman, a very successful white jazz musician and band leader, called himself the “King of Jazz,” Jelly Roll challenged him for that title, as well, insisting that since he invented jazz, he should hold that title, as well. Morton wasn’t able to get that title to stick, however.

From the 1920’s came some of Jelly Roll’s best, most creative music, including “King Porter Stomp,” “New Olean Blues,” “Kansas City Stomp,” “Shreveport Stomp,” and the “Original Jelly Roll Blues.” At this time, Jelly Roll was vigorously recording music, rolling out tunes that became cornerstones of popular music and paved the way for the swing era. His Library of Congress recording session in 1938 was a massive collection in which he gave his version of jazz history to Alan Lomax, and included fifty-two records with over one hundred individual compositions.

Jelly Roll brought other New Orleans jazz musicians to the forefront with his evolving band. Sidney Bichet, Kid Ory, Henry “Red” Allen, Zutty Singleton, and many others, got their start in his band. Some have compared his work with the New Orleans musicians to Louis Armstrong’s work with musicians on the international scene.

Morton’s Extensive Works and Style

In addition to the aforementioned compositional repertoire, Morton continued to change the jazz scene with his new ideas. “Alabama Bound” (1905) drenched its melody in the blues style; “Animule Dance: (1906) used a forearm on the keyboard to produce a roar; “Froggie Moore” (1908) incorporated a rising chromatic line for both its opening theme and as a leitmotif. Other songs that have been rearranged, remixed, and played the most are “Wolverine Blues”, a jazz trio (piano, sax, and drums) with extended ragtime (stomp) ideas; “Milenburg Joys” (1925), and “Wild Man Blues,” each with a definite swing band feel and instrumentation.

Morton’s style often involved multiple themes, often in 16-bar (8+8) lengths, with variations. He created cross-rhythms between the hands with his syncopations, and kept the rhythmic drive intensity much of the time. His left-hand has been likened to a trombone, and his right-hand to a trumpet or clarinet, such that with the hands working together in syncopation, his pianistic style was a jazz band in and of itself. He used short-long rhythmic ideas for his stomps, and included musical surprise breaks which he would actually write into the compositions. From

ragtime, he moved forward into freer rhythms and much more complex styling. (Osborn, 1981).

Morton's extensive recordings began first in Chicago in 1923, featuring himself as an unaccompanied soloist, with pieces such as "King Porter Stomp" and "Jelly Roll Blues." As leader of the Jelly Roll Morton Stomp Kings, he released singles that included "Tiger Rag" and "Tom Cat Blues" in 1923-24. Between 1926-30, his Red Hot Peppers put out singles like "Kansas City Stomps," "Red Hot Pepper," "Mississippi Mud," and "Blue Blood Blues." His other bands included his Trio ("Wolverine Blues, 1927); Jelly Roll Morton and His Orchestra "West End Blues," 1939); the Morton Sextet ("Shake It", 1940); and the Jelly Morton Seven "Panama", 1940). Each of these recorded single releases between 1927-1940, some of which are mentioned here. In addition, Morton and his groups recorded quite a few LP's along the way.

Summary

Few could challenge the fact that Jelly Roll Morton was the first composer to actually score jazz music on paper, demonstrating his complex, contrapuntal style within his prolific writings. Yet, throughout his life, he fought for every title that he believed he earned, and even invested most of his earnings back into his music just to keep his spot in the public ear toward the end of his life. After his death, and the 1992 death of a New Orleans jazz historian and collector, William Russell, thousands of pages of documents were discovered in Russell's collection to corroborate many of Jelly Roll's claims. His abrasive personality caused much of his difficulty holding a

band together and maintaining a measure of popularity in his later days, even though his music continued to evolve. However, it may well be that his personality also helped push the tide along in his music, spawning competitive works among composers, and spreading music with his extensive travels. His descent into extreme poverty at the end of his life is tragic, but also reflects his inability to get along with people. He was considered a liar by members of the press, and even a racist, in the Broadway musical *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992). Later, the movie *The Legend of 1900* (1999) excused him as a cliché, and the Ken Burns TV documentary *Jazz* (2001) reduced him to a bully and a brute. However, compositions from Morton's last few years are considered to be his most ground-breaking by some critics. His later works are almost avant-garde, ten years ahead of their time. Most of these works were left unheard until they were discovered in Russell's collection; Morton had been unable to get anyone to perform or record them in his later years, when he was living in Washington, D.C. and New York City. Russell's collection was significant because it also included copyrights, court records, and letters from that collection confirm Morton's authenticity, after all of the previous bad press. In his book, "Early Jazz, Its Roots and Musical Development," jazz historian Gunther Schuller called Morton the first great composer, and also gave credence to some of Morton's other claims. Schuller (and other writers) credits Morton for setting forth the differences between ragtime, blues, and jazz as early as 1907. Schuller also indicates that Morton could be the inventor of jazz, since he pulled together French and Spanish popular songs and dances, with elements of ragtime and opera into his emerging style. He saw Morton's improvisational style as horizontal, using chord

structures (as in later jazz), rather than themes or melodies, for their basis. These techniques, along with his driving rhythmic momentum, set the stage for later jazz styles. Morton was the first musician to include riffs and breaks in performances, and then to write them down. Morton would also sometimes use blues sounds in his choruses for special effects. Finally, his Red Hot Peppers produced recordings in the 1920's provided proof of his individual and jazz improvisations that fit together to form a unity that brought new complexity to jazz. His recordings show a nice balance of well-rehearsed music that still features fresh improvisations.

So, is Jelly Roll Morton really all that he claimed he was? Perhaps in many ways, he was. As a point of interest, when the readers voted Thelonious Monk into the *Down Beat* Critics' Poll Hall of Fame in 1963, it was the critics who named Morton a member of that same organization in that same year.

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